DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 730 HE 017 308

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TITLE Freshman Seminar Program Evaluation.
PUB DATE Feb 82
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the National Conference on the Freshman Orientation Course/Freshman Seminar Concept (Columbia, SC, February 4-6, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Persistence; *College Freshmen; *Communication Skills; Dropout Prevention; Higher Education; Institutional Research; Program Evaluation; *School Holding Power; *School Orientation; Seminars; *Student Teacher Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *State University of New York Coll at Plattsburgh

ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of the Plattsburgh Freshman Seminar program. which was designed to increase student retention, was evaluated. The 45 hour, three credit program was designed to help students clarify educational and personal goals, to increase faculty-student contact, to develop communication skills, and to familiarize the student with the curriculum. A sample of first-time freshmen students entering the 1980 fall semester at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh was studied. The study population consisted of 205 Freshman Seminar students and 205 comparison group students, who followed the regular curriculum with no special programming. The effects of entering student characteristics, initial attitudes, curricular goals and participation in the seminar were tested at the end of the first semester. Pre-college demographic and personal data were also collected. Students participating in the seminar reported significant contact with faculty and an enhancement of writing and oral skills. The other program goals were not affected by program participation. It is suggested that goals, values, and interests may take time to develop and change, and that the study was limited by measuring retention at the end of the first semester. Implications for retention policies and for further research are considered. (SW)

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FRESHMAN SEMINAR PROGRAM

EVALUATION

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> For every ten students who enter college in the United States, only four will graduate from that college four years later. One more will eventually graduate from the college at some point after those four years. Of the five students who dropped out of the college altogether, four will re-enroll at a different college, and of those four re-enrollees, only two will graduate. Of the six students who dropped out, three did so during the first year.[1]

Fifty percent left college during the first year. In terms of sheer numbers, this attrition problem deserves the attention of those interested in and affiliated with institutions of higher education?

Student attrition from the collegiate environment has been of research interest for nearly half a century. In fact, the national statistics on student attrition have remained relatively constant since the first national study by John McNeely in the mid-1930's. Generally, approximately forty percent of the entering freshmen never graduate. (the rates of attrition vary from public to private and from four year to two year institutions) Of further interest is the phenomena which has occurred over the space of a half century in the number of students who drop out of college for non-academic reasons. Until approximately 1965, the majority of students leaving college

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A paper prepared for presentation at the National Conference on the Freshman Orientation Course/Freshman Seminar Concept, February 4, 5, 6, 1982, University of South Carolina.

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were academic failures. Today students leave for a myriad of reasons ranging from boredom to financial difficulties. According to Cope and Hannah, approximately two-thirds of the dropouts are for non-academic reasons.[2]

Another shift which has taken place in attrition research has been from the descriptive study of entering or withdrawing student characteristics to research concerned with the "fit" between the student and the institution. Initially, "fit" was concerned with selecting students whose scores on standardized tests matched the needs or had the appropriate entry characteristics desired by the institution. During the last decade or so "fit" has been defined in terms of student integration and success at the institution.

Two events occurred nearly simultaneously which changed the motivation. William Spady produced his theoretical model for retention based on Durkheim's Theory of Suicide. Durkheim contended that the potential for suicide is greater when people are not sufficiently integrated into the fabric of society, specificially in terms of values and affiliation or interpersonal relationships.[3] Spady theorized that if the discrepancies between the student and the environment are too great, the student may not be able to become assimilated and accepted into the academic and social milieu of the institution.[4] In 1975, Vincent Tinto postulated based on Spady's work that attrition occurs when a student no longer is socially integrated with other members of the college community and when the student no longer holds the dominant values reflected in the institutions functioning.[5] Central to Tinto's model are interactions with both students and faculty in the formal academic and informal social settings. Both the frequency and quality of those interactions are presumably crucial to modifying the student's college completion goals and commitments to the institution.

As a result of this shift in research attention, much of the recent writing on attrition research has dealt with helping the student remain on the campus.

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Patrick Terinzini and Ernest Pascarella have been profilic in their number of articles dealing with faculty/student contact and interchange. This new emphasis has relegated social integration on the campus to a place where it rivals Grade Point Average as the most significant variable leading to retention of students.

The second event which has occurred of late is the phenomena caused by the decline in the birth rate. The lowering enrollment trends have become a main topic of discussion on college campuses. How does the institution find enough students to replace those leaving? Retention of students is quickly becoming a major influence in the thinking of many campuses. The State University of New York at Plattsburgh is no exception and has developed a program to address the issues of integration and retention. The recent publications by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), and American College Testing program (ACT), What Works in Student Retention and Retention and Attrition (1980) extol the virtues to institutions of higher education of providing intervention programs for entering students.

The program examined at Plattsburgh is a unique freshman experience. The program design was the origination and imagination of an ad hoc summer committee looking at the revision of the college's general education policy. As an outgrowth of that activity, came the desire for a freshman experience that would provide skills needed for college success. The conceptualizers wanted an experience which occurred immediately at the onset of the first semester with the primary aim of academic and social integration. The Freshman Seminar program evolved from these aims as a one-semester, forty-five hour, three credit, voluntary experience with five stated curricular goals:

to help students clarify educational goals,

to help students clarify personal goals,

to increase faculty-student contact,

to develop communication skills (oral and written),

and to convey an understanding of the nature and purpose of the college curriculum.

An assumption underlying this design is that the five curricular goals of the Freshman Seminar once achieved would help students find the appropriate fit between themselves and the institution at Plattsburgh and this fit would lead to a sixth goal--retention of students.

The purpose of the research conducted was to assess the effectiveness of the Plattsburgh Freshman Seminar program in meeting its explicit goals.

The researcher examined the model by focusing on a number of entry and attitudinal variables, providing a control group and using a statistical technique missing in many earlier studies and utilized and encouraged by contemporary researchers--multiple regression.

The five curricular goals each stands on its own as an important educational objective and relates to retention through previous research. The overall hypothesis for the study was that students enrolled in the Freshman Seminar program would progress toward fulfillment of all six goals to a significantly greater extent than those student participating in the control group.

Procedures

The research design for this study incorporated two groups of the first-time freshman cohort of 1,050 students entering the 1980 fall semester at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. Of the total cohort, four hundred ten (410) students ultimately participated in the study; two hundred five (205) Freshman Seminar students and two hundred five (205) Comparison Group students. The effects of entering student characteristics, initial attitudes, curricular goals and participation in the seminar were tested at the end of the first semester to provide data on the effectiveness of the

Plattsburgh Freshman Seminar program model. The control (comparison) group participants followed their regular freshman curriculum with no specifically designed treatments.

Pre-college demographic and personal data were collected on both populations during the summer of 1980 using two college information sources: the Admissions Data Base and the Freshman Survey Questionnaire. The data collected provided descriptive and interpretive information on the groups at the onset of the study. An outcome questionnaire supplied data on the curricular goals at the end of the first semester (December 1980). The response rate for the Freshman Seminar program population was 88.8 percent and the Comparison Group was 89.2 percent.

Implications

Clearly, one of the most obvious findings was the positive effect of program participation on two of the seminar goals. Students participating in the Freshman Seminar reported significant contact with faculty and an enhancement of their writing and oral skills. The results have positive implications for student adjustment, grade point average and retention as indicated by several authors and researchers mentioned earlier. It was suggested through this experimentation in the seminar model that students were likely to reach the goals of increased contact with faculty and development of communication skills if they were afforded the opportunity to meet in classes of limited enrollment, with an informal setting, and an occasion to share thoughts and ideas both orally and in composition. The implication for college administrators and faculty should be the desirability of providing an atmosphere within which these goals can be reached. Smaller classes with faculty cognizant of the needs of entering freshman and/or development of a mandatory freshman program design using these two goals may be alternatives worth careful scrutiny by the college faculty and administration. Unfortunately, entering class size, curricular format

within disciplines and mandated student/faculty ratios make small classes unlikely, uneconomical, and inefficient.

Freshman Seminar participation was found to lack significance for the remaining three curricular goals of the seminar: clarification of educational goals and interests, clarification of personal goals and interests, and conveying an understanding of the nature and purpose of the college curriculum. This finding has important implications for a re-examination of the Freshman Seminar curriculum, as well as continued study. The lack of significance may indicate these things: First, the curricular objectives were being addressed in forums other than the Freshman Seminar Program. Data collected on the Freshman Seminar Outcome Survey suggests that all students in the study have a good understanding of the curriculum. This may be the result of continuing efforts on the part of the College, individual departments, and faculty members in advising students. A similar statement cannot be made for educational and personal goals, values and interests, Goals Three and Four respectively.

Secondly, a lack of Freshman Seminar significance may mean that faculty were unaware of, or failed to teach to the goals of the seminar. Such findings necessitate a re-examination of the curricular goals of the seminar as to their applicability, and to the need for procedures to assure implementation of designated goals, e.g. faculty workshops, common curriculum. From the examination conducted in this study, it was indicated that the goals found to be significant in the Freshman Seminar Program were goals thought to be important by the faculty, Goals One and Two - increased faculty/student contact and development of communication skills. The remaining goals were not considered important by a number of the faculty. The hypotheses was that faculty aware of and feeling the goals to be important would offer the opportunity for meeting the goals.

Thirdly, additional time may be necessary for program outcome effects to materialize. Significant differences between the two groups may appear in subsequent follow-up survey examinations. Goals, values and interests take time to develop and change.

The lack of significance of the Freshman Seminar program on retention may be due to the limitation in this study of measuring retention at the end of the first semester of the freshman year, although a follow-up examination at the end of the first year did not change the findings. Two implications were suspect in this finding at the end of the first semester: 1) College policy and procedures used in academic progress and 2) Timing.

College policies and procedures covering academic progress of students may have been lenient enough to allow students below the minimum passing grade point average to continue in hopes of overcoming the problems encountered during their initial semester.

The second implication concerning retention was implicit in the first--timing. While researchers have stressed the need for programs to aid in the integration of students into the academic and social mileau of the institution, a two to five year study may be necessary to determine the real impact of such programs on retention and program goals. While measurements of retention have been taken at the end of the first semester (Cope and Hannah, 1975), the beginning of the third year of college or later should prove more effective in measuring program results. It takes time to succeed, it takes time to fail and it takes time for program influences to take effect.

A further implication that must be acknowledged was that the goals of the seminar may have been too broad. The goals set forth for the Freshman Seminar were related to retention research and were therefore worthwhile, however, a program with clear curricular objectives imparting what the seminar should do and what should be experienced by students throughout the semester would allow

for a close examination of the goals. Because the seminar was only one small part of a students' freshman experience, it was difficult to ascertain where goals were achieved.

The evaluation of the Plattsburgh Freshman Seminar program has produced several implications as detailed above. These implications have led to a better understanding of the impact of the Freshman Seminar program at Plattsburgh on retention and program goals and have produced results which should be incorporated in future research. These implications should aid the Plattsburgh faculty in reasserting their aim of providing the best possible education for entering freshman students, and these implications should aid other institutions in their development and evaluation of Freshman Seminar programs.

Recommendations for Further Research

In the design and implementation of this study, several directions and caveats for future research appeared:

1. The use of extended longitudinal analysis should be incorporated. Program effects may evolve over time and the snap-shot offered by the short longitudinal analysis of one semester, while important, lacks the perspective of time. Programs such as the one evaluated at Plattsburgh should be judged on their merit based on data after several semesters with several classes.

2. Faculty teaching freshman programs should be made fully aware of the goals of such programs and be given the opportunity to develop teaching techniques for attaining such goals prior to assignment to a class. Such training should help assure that faculty will be aware of the purpose of the curriculum and will be able to provide information on the programmatic goals. Faculty unaware of the purpose and goals will be likely to revert to an introductory course within their discipline. A survey of faculty understanding of the goals should be conducted to determine whether implementation of the goals is taking place.

3. All institutions establishing freshman programs should empirically evaluate their models longitudinally. Such a practice will provide external validity for existing programs and add to the significant findings of other evaluations.

This study has examined a critical period in a students' adjustment to college--the first semester. This period, indicated by researchers to be the most crucial in terms of retention, needs additional research. The dip in the birth rate with the accompanying projections for education in the eighties means administrators and faculty will be addressing these problems in order to reduce attrition. With the inability to predict retention based on incoming student variables, other techniques must be found which will add to the student persistence effort. Freshman programs are one possible solution and the evaluation of such programs should continue. The valuable information received from such evaluation helps re-define the objectives and provides a starting point for colleges and universities seeing to develop programs.

FOOTNOTES

1. Timothy J. Pantages and Carol F. Creedon, "Studies of College Attrition," Review of Educational Research, 48 (Winter, 1978): 40.

2. Robert G Cope and William Hannah, Revolving College Doors: The Causes and Consequences of Dropping Out and Transferring, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), p. 9.

3. Vincent Tinto, "Dropouts from Higher Education: A Theoritical Synthesis of Recent Research," Review of Educational Research, 45 (Winter, 1975): 91.

4. William G. Spady "Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis," Interchange, I 1970, p. 78.

5. Tinto, p. 96.

Complete Source:
Woodward, Frederick, "The Effects of a Freshman Seminar Program on Program Goals and Retention", University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, December, 1981.